





The future of family farming in mountains: policy messages



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Credit circle, Myanmar (T. Kohler)

Family farming, the main type of land use in mountain regions worldwide, is practised in many different ways. Mountain environments require specific management and husbandry choices to cope with altitudinal or seasonal changes in resource availability. Mountain farmers have developed specific techniques, institutions and knowledge which enable them to make a living in mountain environments.

The benefits of family farming in mountains go far beyond the mountain regions and contribute to societies at large. Globally, mountains provide freshwater to half of the world's population, in many ways thanks to the water and soil management practised by mountain farmers. Mountains are also reservoirs of global biodiversity including agro-biodiversity – and mountain farmers have been the custodians of this genetic richness for centuries.

Yet today, family farming in mountain regions is undergoing rapid transformation, due to both internal and external drivers such as population growth, economic globalization and market integration, penetration of urban lifestyles, outmigration of men and youth, and the resulting increased workload for women who remain behind, and increasing claims on land for conservation and large-scale resource extraction, such as mining. These have contributed to higher pressure on local resources, unsustainable practices in land use, disintegration of local customs and traditions, and increased vulnerability to global change.

At the same time, however, these drivers of transformation can also provide opportunities for local development, enhancing the role of family farming and improving the quality of life of mountain farmers. For example, they offer opportunities for increasing farm production sustainably and for diversifying livelihoods by engaging in non-farm activities such as tourism and marketing of local handicrafts. The case studies presented in this publication, collected from mountain regions around the world, show how mountain regions and family farmers benefit from the opportunities these social, economic and environmental transformations present.

Policy messages

- Mountain family farmers and pastoralists have always adapted actively to change, and they continue to do so. However, these efforts need to be supported by enabling policies that will help them adapt to ongoing changes in a sustainable way, in order to achieve sustainable livelihoods and maintain important mountain ecosystem services for themselves and for the many people living downstream.
- National policies that support secure land tenure, access to resources and empower women are a key requirement for promoting sustainable family farming in mountain regions. The same is true for public investment in education, health, transport and research, and for extension services that support farmers in achieving sustainable farming practices through advice in areas such as appropriate use of external inputs including seeds, fertilizers and pesticides.
- Access to credit is crucial for mountain farmers. Their specific conditions call for special granting criteria, including providing access to credit without collateral.
- Good practices in mountain farming over time and across countries need to be preserved and disseminated. Inappropriate techniques used in mountain environments can quickly lead to erosion, land degradation and even desertification. Innovative techniques and traditional knowledge need to be carefully integrated to increase and restore resilience, with the promotion of a repository of successful practices to be shared globally.
- Production for home consumption is now and will remain the main aim of most family farms in mountains, especially in developing countries. However, better access to markets and credit, and equal rights for women and men can help farmers optimize allocation of farm resources, increase their income and move out of poverty. Creating, labelling and selling quality mountain products derived from organic production is one method farmers can use to improve their livelihoods. Encouraging collaboration and implementing activities such as farmer associations and cooperatives can help lower the barriers to access the markets.
- Policies for mountain family farming need to be embedded in an overall policy of regional mountain development. These policies should promote regional centres and small towns, which provide alternative employment opportunities in the artisanal, industrial and service sectors, stimulate the local economy and reduce outmigration – especially youth outmigration, which is a serious problem in many mountain areas.
- Sustainable mountain family farming produces ecosystem services that are vital for downstream areas and for which farmers should be compensated. Such services include sound watershed management for the provision of freshwater, conservation of biodiversity including vital genetic resources of locally adapted crops and livestock, and attractive cultural landscapes for tourism and recreation.
- Context-specific policies must be shaped for promoting family farming in mountain regions. In the low and middle income countries, promotion should be coupled with poverty alleviation policies. Urbanization, market integration and infrastructure development, which drive development, hold risks as well as opportunities for mountain farmers. The high income countries face the increasing loss of family farms in mountains, which brings with it the real possibility that this type of family farming may disappear completely, taking with it an important element of mountain cultural heritage.



Appropriate technology (T. Kohler)